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ABSTRACT

This paper explores issues related to alternative assessment approaches in language arts and social studies classrooms. A rationale for a more comprehensive assessment approach within a democratic framework is developed, and ideas for constructing rubrics in language arts and social studies classrooms are presented. Pedagogical implications for the enhancement of professional teaching and creating a more democratic culture of learning are considered. As the example of a writing rubric demonstrates, standards or grading criteria for social studies and language arts activities must be clear, realistic, challenging, and consistently reinforced. Scoring criteria, or rubrics, can: (1) reduce biases by defining clearly excellent, good, or poor work; (2) have consistent guidelines understood by all parties; and (3) help students evaluate their own work and progress toward excellence. Democratic assessment procedures in tandem with tested and proven evaluation standards and tools can contribute to maximizing learning and improving teaching in schools. In addition, a democratic approach to assessment must be linked to the students' own expectations and background knowledge. (Contains nine references.) (SLD)

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An Alternative Approach for Language Arts and Social Studies Assessment

ED 418 121

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An Alternative Approach for Language Arts and Social Studies Assessment

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Introduction

The modern reform movement began in 1983 with a report that was published by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. This document put forth the notion that the United States was a nation is at risk. This was predicated in part on multifarious circumstances as well as the public's perception surrounding the nation's school system. To counter this turmoil, changes in curriculum, standards, assessment approaches, time in school, and pre-service teacher programs were revisited and recommendations made.

Then in 1986, both the Holmes group and the Carnegie Task Force released their findings to the public in which they caviled the poor performance of the teaching profession in general and the ineffectiveness of pre-service teacher programs in particular. The exigency was to redesign pre-service teacher programs that, in turn, would produce more adequately trained teachers. An example of this new cynosure is illustrated in the purpose of the first two goals of the Holmes group. In fact, the intent of these guidelines was specifically aimed at creating teacher pre-service programs that produced educators who were solid intellectually, and possessed high quality skills to teach in their specific subject areas (Howey, 1990). These high quality professional teachers would be competent, know their subject in a comprehensive manner, and could administer and assess the content in such an auspicious fashion that it would enhance and optimize classroom instruction.

The solution to various problems in schools has always been traced in many cases to classical democratic principles. For instance, Dewey (1966) contends that democracy must not be delinked from any avenue of human life. In particular, it must be integrated in all aspects of educational institutions such as schools. Once democracy is the axiom upon which learning and teaching are based, promising educational outcomes will follow.

Unquestionably, effective assessment and accountability are essential for high quality professional teaching. In particular, it is "critical for teachers who wish to create and sustain democratic cultures in their classrooms" (Lieber, Mikel, & Pervil, 1994, p.232), to invoke alternative standards in terms of the demands of the learning/teaching context along with the expectations of civic educational goals.

This paper explores these issues pertinent to alternative assessment approaches in language arts and social studies classrooms. First, an rationale for a more comprehensive assessment approach within the democratic framework will be provided. Second, ideas for constructing rubrics in language arts and social studies classrooms will be presented. Finally, pedagogical implications will be provided to enhance effective professional teaching and create a more democratic culture of learning in these classrooms.

Assessment: An Alternative Approach

Assessment has largely influenced by various paradigms and schools of thought. It has also been shaped by sociopolitical pressures in the school culture. This is especially true in the elementary and secondary school environments where interacting events are intricately related and often unpredictable. In such settings assessment can be viewed from multiple perspectives, approaches, and practices.

Broadly defined, assessment in educational settings involves making judgments about learning that takes place in classrooms in terms of given standards set by the school and other agencies. In other words, educational assessment is an attempt to account for students' acquisition of expected competencies within a set of variable of interest. The process directly influences both the assessed (students) and the those who assess (teachers).

It is worthwhile to examine the shift over the years from traditional to democratic assessment. It is not our intent to show preference of one approach over the other. Instead, a comparison would allow teachers to incorporate whatever works in the contest of their classrooms. While some techniques may seem appealing, others may raise some concerns. Nonetheless, all approaches are equally significant in meeting the assessment needs of the context at question.

Having this in mind, Lieber, Mikel, & Pervil (1994, pp. 235-238) outlined the paradigm shift in assessment. Following is a summary of their dichotomy along with the salient traits of each paradigm:

Traditional Paradigm	*Democratic Paradigm*
inequality	equality
monologue	dialogue
coercive	invitational
dehumanizing	dignifying
external rewards	internal rewards
contrived and disconnected	authentic and purposeful
limited choices	free choices
autocratic decision making	shared decision making
voice of authority	student voice
single perspective	multiple perspectives
cultural uniformity	cultural diversity
one approach	multiple approaches
predetermined goals	emergent goals
competitive learning	collaborative problem solving
one-dimensional	multi-dimensional . . .

Given the urgent need for an open inquiry in educational assessment that is free from any dogmatic militancy (McKenna, Robinson, & Miller, 1990), efforts to advance the reform agenda in assessing social studies and language skills have been underway as several national agencies, such as the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and many others, to set standards in terms of the democratic paradigm. Their purpose was to develop a philosophical construct that would advance academic, social, linguistic as well as civic competence for curriculum developers of social studies and language arts. From this genesis evolved the formal definition of these areas in an attempt to integrate the study of the social sciences, language arts, humanities, and other content areas to promote civic and linguistic competence. Through this integration within the school program, social studies and language arts provide coordination, systematic study drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, linguistics, ethnography, cultural pluralism, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences. The primary purpose such integration is to help young people develop the ability to make informed decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world (NCSS, 1994, p. vii).

It must be cautioned that this approach does not imply any set of mandated outcomes or establish a national curriculum for the social studies and language arts. It does,

however, suggest that an integrated social studies and language arts perspective should be one that is academically sound, multidisciplinary, and comprehensive.

The expectations for successfully incorporating these various themes would be in instituting benchmarks or guidelines for the integration of state, local, and classroom curricular plans. It was posited that these guidelines would then have a strong influence on classroom practice, enhancing student learning, and promoting appropriate and accurate student assessment. As this growth and change is fully realized, an integrated social studies and language arts curriculum would then emerge that benefits all diverse learners in the classrooms of today as well as tomorrow.

Meanwhile, there has been several counterreactions or counterreforms against the direction purposed by various modern educational reformers. One of these reactions can be categorized as the back to basics movement. Those who espouse such beliefs receive support in many quarters including various states' new education legislation as well as other mandated state assessment requirements.

However, in all likelihood, these efforts are doomed to fail. They are destined to failure not because the intent of the individuals or organizations is wrong per se; they will fail inevitably because this position is one of retrenchment rather than transformation. That is, the back to basics movement embraces a philosophical construct that puts faith in the notion of returning schools back to a simpler and kinder past. In this idealized state of reminiscing, teachers spend more time on the skills associated with reading, writing, and computation, and less on subjects like social studies, particularly in the primary grades. To examine the credibility of this view, an apparent concern needs to be addressed: Why choose the subjects of reading, writing, and math over other content areas? Does mastery of these competencies produce more academic or civic minded students or both? Obviously, these are the kinds of skills that many standardized tests assess and consequently the media reports to the public.

For a new teacher, this can be a very gelatinous situation. One may believe that all students need to be free to construct their own knowledge. However, sole reliance on one approach at the expense of another can reinforce biases and be self-serving to the students. On the opposite end of the spectrum is the teacher constructing the one and only "truth". Somewhere in between these two extremes are where most teachers function within a classroom.

What's more? Recent trends indicate that the more a teacher is explicit about their evaluation standards and criteria, the more students can understand and therefore embrace them. When standards are constructed jointly by local, state, parental groups, and teachers, the resulting criteria tend to be readily adopted.

Assessment Criteria and the Construction of Rubrics

Teachers in elementary schools are seen implementors of educational goals at the local, state, and national levels. In many cases they are to be held accountable for measuring the expected learning outcomes. The above alternative approach to assessment views teachers roles to be very critical. They are to be involved in not only consuming what research says about effective assessment tools, but producers of that reseach. Thus, their insight into the effectiveness of assessment should be incorporated in various guidelines.

Several questions arise when it comes to assessment in elementary schools. What are the pitfalls to be avoided in assessment? How can a given learning activity be measured? What are the criteria for measurement? What exactly does the teacher want? How does the teacher assess? These questions and others must be answered in a very delicate way conducive to equity and justice for those being assessed--the students.

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Standards and Student Expectations

The standards or grading criteria for activities must be clear, realistic, challenging, and consistently reinforced. Certainly, standards are not the same as student expectations. Expectations are connected to previous achievement and perceptions held by both the student and teacher. Standards, on the other hand, should require the students to go at least one step farther than their current performance levels. Well written standards and grading criteria can help the professional teacher in several ways. These scoring criteria or rubrics can:

1. reduce biases by clearly defining what is meant by excellent, good, or poor work;
2. have consistent guidelines that are understood by all concerned parties;
3. help students evaluate their own work and progress towards excellence.

Example of Writing Rubric Framework

Understanding Frontier Life in the New Colonies

Question: How has the status of immigration changed since the first settlers came to the colonies? Discuss specific contributions made by these early immigrant settlers.

Scoring Writing Rubric

To be used by both the student and teacher

Score 5 - Excellent

Planning:

_____I have completely filled out a student planning guide or outline for my paper.
_____My plan will lead to a complete and accurate answer to the Assessment Question.

Information Processing:

_____I combine facts from three or more sources; at least one is a primary source.
_____I include at least two different formats.
_____The facts I used are accurate, relevant, and fit the Assessment Question.
_____I combined rich, relevant, and accurate facts and ideas that fit the Assessment Question.
_____My research addressed at least two of the following perspective:___Anthropology/Sociology, ___Civics/Government, ____History, ___Geography, ___Economics.
_____I correctly used at least four sources. Two of these are different primary sources.
_____Two of the four sources represent different source formats.
_____I have noted these sources in my planning guide or annotated bibliography.

Integration/Complex Thinking:

_____I answered the question reasonably and completely.
_____I justify the use of my perspective and show the relationship to the Assessment Question.
_____I provided an answer to the Assessment Question which was completely supported and reasonable.
_____I demonstrated how two perspectives supported my answer to the Assessment Question.
_____I applied my answer/solution to a related real-life issue in my conclusion.

Communication:

_____My main idea is clear and is presented in a way appropriate to audience and purpose.
_____My project is well organized and the presentation is strong.

Score 3 - Good

Planning:

_____I have filled out most of a student planning guide or outline.
_____Some parts of my planning guide may need improvement to lead to a complete answer to the Assessment Question.

Information Processing:

_____I combine facts from two different sources.
_____My primary source is not evident, is missing or I use only one format.
_____Although my facts are accurate, some do not apply to the Assessment Question.
_____My research addressed at least one of the following perspectives: ___Anthropology/Sociology, ___Civics/Government, ____History, ___Geography, ___Economics.
_____I correctly used three sources. One of these is a primary source and I have used two source formats.

_____I have noted these sources in my planning guide or annotated bibliography.
_____I pulled together mostly relevant facts and ideas, but some may not apply to the Assessment Question.

Integration/Complex Thinking:

My answer was somewhat unreasonable.

_____I attempt to justify the use of my perspective.
_____The relationship to the Assessment Question is not clear.
_____I provided a reasonable answer to the Assessment Question, but only some of my information supported it.
_____I demonstrated how one perspective supported my answer to the Assessment Question.
_____I tried to apply my answer/solution to a related real-life issue but the connection was unclear.

Communication:

_____My main idea is fairly clear, but may be marginally appropriate for the audience and purpose.
_____My project is organized and the presentation is adequate.
_____My sentence structure and word choice are appropriate to the ideas I am trying to present.

Score 1 - Poor

Planning:

_____I have filled out part of a student planning guide or outline.
_____My plan would not lead to an answer to the Assessment Question.

Information Processing:

_____I use facts form one source to answer my Assessment Question.
_____The facts I use contain inaccurate information or do not apply to the Assessment Question.
_____My research included information that doesn't clearly represent the perspective(s) I chose.
_____I correctly used two or less sources.
_____I collected information that is inaccurate or does not apply to the Assessment Question.

Integration/Complex Thinking:

_____My answer was unreasonable. I do not explain why my perspective was chosen.
_____I provided some information but it was not clear how it answered the Assessment Question.
_____I attempted to demonstrate how one perspective supported my answer to the Assessment Question.
_____I do not apply my answer/solution to a related real life issue or failed to explain the connection.

Communication:

_____My main idea was not clear or was unrelated to the Assessment Question.
_____My project is unorganized and the presentation is hard to follow.
_____My sentence structure and word choice distracts from the idea(s) I am trying to present.

Example Rubric For Oral Assessment

Understanding Frontier Life in the New Colonies

Purpose: Assessing role-playing, simulations, speeches, classroom presentations, readings, etc.

Scoring Rubric for Oral Assessment

To be used by both the student and teacher

Score 5 - Excellent

_____Enthusiastic about Presenting/Talking.
_____Uses excellent expression.
_____Speaks in phases or groups of words well.
_____Does not lose place while presenting.
_____Speaks at an appropriate rate of speed.
_____Comprehends what has been stated.
_____Answers questions from audience clearly.

Score 4 - Very Good

_____Appears to enjoy presenting/talking.
_____Uses good expression.
_____Speaks in phrases or groups of words fairly well.

_____Does not lose place while presenting.
_____Speaks at appropriate rate of speed.
_____Comprehends what has been read.
_____Answers questions from the audience clearly.

Score 3 - Good

_____Presents to fulfill the assignment.
_____Speaks at slow rate or speed.
_____Speaks in phrases or groups of words.
_____Comprehends what has been read.
_____Questions from the audience are answered partially.

Score 2 - Limited

_____Does not like to speak.
_____Speaks with little expression.
_____Speaks in short phrases or groups of words or may speak in a word-by-word manner.
_____Does not fully comprehend what is read.
_____Questions from the audience are answered with minimum effort.

Score 1 - Poor

_____Speaks because of assignment.
_____Speaks with no expression.
_____Speaks word-by-word or at a very slow rate of speed.
_____Does not comprehend what is read.
_____Questions from the audience receive only the most basic or no response at all.

Score 0 - Failed

_____Makes no attempt to present/talk.

Of course, several other strategies can be used to construct rubrics given the nature of the learning task at hand and given the expected educational outcomes in the classroom situation. For instance, if comprehending the causal chain in a story is the target goal in a reading class, a set of criteria can be generated in terms of implicit and explicit types of multi-mark and essay questions. Likewise, if a publishable written piece is the goal, another set of criteria can be created in terms of the basic principles of effective multi-trait writing which require a dynamic balance between content and form in students' written product.

In all these cases the value of assessment lies in the fact that effective instruction can be derived. Also effective feedback can be provided to help students overcome their weaknesses and capitalize on their strengths.

Pedagogical Implications

Democratic assessment procedures in tandem with tested and proven evaluation standards and tools can contribute to maximizing learning and improving teaching in schools. In particular, rubrics are an excellent way to assist students in receiving immediate and specific feedback, which contribute in a positive way to continued academic growth as well as future success. Although it is helpful for students to understand how they are to be assessed, it is just as important to have specific illustrations done by other students posted so that the students can see how the rubric and the assignment are evaluated together. This may demystify the grading process and may effectively lower students' anxiety as well as promote positive classroom climate. Also learning will be viewed as a goal for learning's sake rather than for obtaining a grade.

In addition, test manuals are provided within texts as well as other resource materials to help assess the students' progress. These assessments have been under attack in recent years because they typically measure lower cognitive recalling skills and have

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inconsistent criteria. However, when used in conjunction with other assessment techniques, they can contribute valuable information to the teacher to help them design instruction that benefits all students.

Furthermore, a democratic approach to assessment must not be delinked from the students' expectations and background knowledge; i.e. it must be contextualized in the areas at hand. Gardner (1983; 1991) defines assessment as the obtaining of information about the skills and potentials of individuals, with the dual purpose of providing useful feedback to both the student as well as the teacher. This belief endorses the concept of giving students assessment in context--not at various times of the year, on certain days, or at a specific hour of every week that a student is in school. In fact, contained in this notion is the idea that assessment should become a part of the activities done daily in all subject areas. In other words, assessment is not a separate activity conducted as an alien component separate from the other classroom activities.

Capitalizing on the notion of context and featured multiple intelligence assessment, Campbell, Campbell, & Dickinson (1996) argue that spatial learners are creative thinkers and do what computers cannot. They abandon language when occasion demands and enter into other modes of thought. Specifically, these spatially creative thinkers are ambidextrous. In other words, they learn to think visually, which is vital to their integrated kind of mental activity.

Doing language and social studies is not an exception. Assessment tools and approaches must be implemented in myriad ways as profound as the mechanisms of language and social fluctuations. Finally, teachers must keep the following guidelines in mind when using the proposed assessment approach:

1. Establish a grading criteria that is posted and public.
2. Be aware of what specifically needs to be assessed.
3. Model and communicate the goal and function of the approach to the students.
4. Skills and assessment should relate directly to stated district/school goals.
5. Skills and assessment should also relate to grade level equivalency.
6. Examine the social studies or language textbook that you use in your school.
7. Compare stated objectives to the school's, state's standards or national standards.
8. Adapt the prescribed standards to the learning/teaching context.
9. Derive instruction from assessment and vice versa.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a general framework for assessment in language arts and social studies classroom. A rationale to combine various formal and informal assessment techniques in elementary schools is implied in the discussion. Also ideas regarding constructing rubrics and generating criteria items are presented. Given the intricate relation between assessment and instruction, several pedagogical implications are presented. It is our hope that the information presented will contribute to the effective teaching practices in the 21st century democratic classrooms.

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